CHAPTER 2

R. A. W. ASSMILK SOAP

Karin Bolender

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What happens when our words become so utterly polluted that we cannot wield them without hurting—or, at the very least, obscuring—ourselves and those we love? As a poet with a busted tongue, befuddled by a passion for wordless bodies of animal wisdom that are seldom honored in my inherited culture, I have had to find other means to express particular forms of intimacy and love. My authority is most troubled by awareness that despite the all-mighty human endowment of logos and opposable thumbs, our multispecies story is not mine alone to tell. I barely reckon the half of it. For the past decade, I have wrestled with this impasse: How can I tell my story, utterly enmeshed as it is with a family of American Spotted Asses (*Equus asinus*), knowing full well that words cannot encompass the "animal" others' sides of the story?[1]

An impasse, indeed. But the main enterprise of the Rural Alchemy Workshop (R. A. W.) is to find ways to reckon with just such impasses as these. The story begins in the summer of 2002, when I made a seven-week walking journey across the American South—beginning in Mississippi, weaving across Tennessee, ending in Virginia—with Aliass, a six-year-old female white-and-brown American Spotted Ass out of Maury County, Tennessee. This long-ass journey as a whole has many roots and outgrowths, but one aspect in particular became a potent source of material for R. A. W. Assmilk Soap. Though I didn't know it when I first met Aliass in the gloom of a Tennessee cowshed, she was pregnant. Over the many miles of our journey, as I walked behind her day after day on city streets and rural back roads, and as we slept nights

in random churchyards and patches of woods, a biological fact I had absorbed years before in a livestock husbandry class kept coming back to me: a pregnant mammal should never leave her local environment just before giving birth, because her thick first milk—known as colostrum—contains antibodies to the specific pathogens where she has been gestating. By extension, then, any milk is entangled with places: made of everything the mammalian motherbody eats, drinks, and breathes as she feeds the growing fetus and, eventually, the newborn.

All across the wickedly hot, haunted, weedy, and bastard-beautiful South that summer, Aliass's blood and mammary glands brewed antibodies to hidden, harmful elements in the places we passed through. Aliass was percolating a supercharged fetal-ass healing brew. This colostrum she made held residues and traces of all the miles we traveled, wading through roadside weeds and trash and broken glass, lonesome and thistle-grown hayfields, crossroads and train tracks, and the harrowed traces of long-gone mules and ghosts of the American South. Aliass's body made this special milk night and day, in the heat and in the shade, and from every blade of grass, blackberry, and drink from bucket, flowing water, or cracked-edge pond along the way—from the creek water she sucked in as the red sun went down on Oak Ridge, Tennessee, where the first uranium was refined for the atom bombs that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki, to the melting Creamsicles she shared with me and some local kids who had followed us for blocks along the blazing, broken sidewalk of Nashville's housing projects. Aliass's milk-to-be held traces of all the border crossings, borrowed pastures, hot asphalt, roadside grasses, dark nights in strangers' woods, and infinite encounters with countless other beings, both visible and unseen—held it all like memory is supposed to.

After seven weeks on the road, Aliass and I settled for a time on a magnificent one-hundred-acre farm in the Appalachian foothills of southwestern Virginia. Then we waited, as she grew wider and wider. Passenger was born at long last in mid-September. After riding along in utero the whole way, she stood wobblily to suckle on colostrum that held traces of our whole long-ass journey. Over time, she grew her own bones and thick fur on its nourishment. Over the years that passed—and especially as memory of our adventures on the road began to fade—the notion of Aliass's milk holding unnamable essences and residues of that first long trip across the South became more and more potent in my imagination. Her milk became a figural vessel for all of the unique encounters and unresolved longings we both carried all that way, from Oxford, Mississippi, to Bewilderness, Virginia, and beyond.

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FIGURE 2.1 Aliass on a highway overpass just outside of Oxford, Mississippi, on the first day of the long-ass journey in the summer of 2002. Photograph by Karin Bolender. See multispecies-salon.org/bolender.

FIGURE 2.2 Aliass nurses the newborn Passenger. Photograph by Karin Bolender. See multispecies-salon.org/bolender.

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But the roots of wondering and wandering go deeper yet. Years before I met Aliass, or had ever heard of an American Spotted Ass, I had a secret name for this otherwise unnamable thing I desired to mine in a flow of words and submerged memories. I called it "the black milk." Every time I sat down to write, I would begin by asking: "Where is the black milk now?" And by this means I would begin a descent into dark crevasses of longing and memory and work my way toward shadowy forms submerged in the past. Even as it stood for something inchoate, fearsome, and hard to grasp, this black milk, I sensed, also possessed some kind of homeopathic, transformative power to cleanse and redeem.

Eventually I rediscovered a black-milk antecedent in Paul Celan's "Death-fugue" (1945): "Black milk of daybreak we drink it at evening."[2] The milk in the poem is black with ashes from Auschwitz, which rained from the sky overnight and darkened the morning milk of a nearby dairy, thus staining the quintessential substance of maternal nourishment and bodily intimacy with irrevocable traces of atrocity. As I looked more deeply at this metaphor, Celan's poem brought to the surface a vital, if latent, association between black milk and "the mother tongue"—that is, the language we are born into as humans and live within, inescapably. When Celan lost his mother and father to the Nazi death camps, his German mother tongue became, as his translator and biographer, John Felstiner, puts it, "his mother's murderers' tongue."[3] The language itself became stained with atrocity and loss. In light of this, and from the depths of unfathomable trauma, Celan was compelled to wrest a new language: hybrid word forms forged from mangled remnants of his mother tongue in his attempts to recover meaning and memory from so profound a void.

Black milk as a trope figures a kind of absence inscribed into material substance: The blackness of milk becomes a shadowy residue of lost connection to some body, some where, however formless or unnamed. While what haunted me was nowhere near as horrific or devastating as the losses to which Celan's poems bear witness, I have come to understand that my own struggles with language-as-mother-tongue are also driven by a sense of profound loss and betrayal. Guided more deeply into the black milk–mother tongue nexus by the Austrian poet Ingeborg Bachmann and, later, by the psychoanalytic insights of Julia Kristeva, I looked back at my own black-milk hungers to try to find out what shadowy figures abided in them.[4] Eventually I discovered this: It was not the loss of my mother, per se, that so troubled my negotiations with language in the purgatory chasm we humans inhabit between words and living bodies; rather, it was the loss of my mother's

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place, her land, literally her family farm . . . and my grandmother's and great-grandmother's before that. My own special brand of black milk welled up from a landscape of abandoned barns and acres of paved-over pastures and, most of all, from a sense of having lost connection to a matrix—a mammalian mother tongue—much larger than any single bodily being or species.

Technically, I was born on a sterile air force base and not in a barn. But the barn is nevertheless where I found my native tongue, in time. From my earliest reckonings, the original family farm in Ohio was a visceral source of the most profound wonder: An ordinary patch of grass in the pasture or motes spiraling in a lofty beam of barn light were sites of infinite richness, all particles of the greater mystery that lived there in the dusty aura of common animal being. This mystery was most fiercely embodied in the big domestic animals who lived there. When I was very small, my aunt's horse Irvy lived in the barnyard on the old farm, and some of my first memories are of his boundless and thrilling presence. Irvy was more than an animal; he was an entire environment. Being near Irvy at that age and size was an utter immersion in a presence of rich earthy odors, sounds, and sensations. His head was as big as my whole body. The rubbery lips and whiskers of his big kind muzzle coming down from way above, looming close and sniffing, then blowing out a cloud of sweet-smelling breath. . . . Irvy could not have seemed more magical if he was actually a friendly fire-breathing dragon. He was horse, of course, and soon enough I learned to call all the animals by their proper names and put them in their places.

This brings us back to the conundrum of the mother tongue and to that specific site where, for me, it forks into a painful split—that is, in the barnyard. Significantly, the site of my primal encounter with Irvy was on the same ancestral farm where my mother spent a singular summer of her own childhood in the mid-1950s, living with her young aunt Jean, who was seemingly half-equine herself (and who, incidentally, was the first woman to earn a degree in animal husbandry from Ohio State University). My mother remembers running wild in the pastures all summer with her older brother, riding bareback and braiding flowers into the mane of a spotted mare named Marblecake. An old photo of my eight-year-old mother shows her in a short dress with her hand on the sleek spotted shoulder of Cupcake, Marblecake's foal. Other old photos plucked from the family scrapbook show Cupcake grown up and in her winter fur, hitched to a sleigh in deep snow; Cupcake in a sea of green grass, carrying one of my mother's cherubic younger cousins bareback, surrounded by the farm's resident flock of Dalmatians.

I suspect that, in some magic and fateful way, Aliass began with Cupcake.[5]

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I only ever glimpsed Cupcake once, a far-off patch of bony brown and white seen fleetingly from a car window as we passed an impossibly green Virginia hollow where she had been turned out to pasture with cattle in her old age; from all I had heard about her, it was like seeing a mythical beast across the veils of time. My mother's recollections of that halcyon summer with Marblecake became part of my own story before I even had ears, and more so thereafter, as the generations, horse and human, twisted down through the later decades of the twentieth century. Through my childhood, my mother's stories, and the longings and kinships borne in them, took earthly forms in encounters with real dogs and horses. I can still recall the sweet-edged, dusty smell and wiry mane of Cupcake's foal Crumb, a black gelding I got to know as a beloved and notorious member of the extended family on the springtime trips we took over the years to visit great-aunt Jean on her family's horse farm in Virginia.

The ancestral farm has since succumbed to the sprawls of Columbus. Needless to say, it was not the only one. As more and more family farms disappeared under housing developments and parking lots, the sprawl of asphalt and mown lawns gradually cut off access to the original source of raw animal kinships found there. I grew up into the late twentieth century watching a steady disappearance of such places where people had long lived entangled with other domestic species. Meanwhile, I grew up and studied and became critically aware of the legacies of colonial history and industrial technoculture. I grew skeptical of humanist assumptions, witnessing firsthand the violent species hierarchies and sickening materialist commodifications of animal lives that shape the American stable and barnyard.[6] More than all that, though, I was haunted by an acute sense of loss that came with the end of access to these familiar sites of kinship and mystery, rooted in wonder and respect toward our animal companions.

And with this awareness came that split in the mother tongue. In my own version of black milk, I sought forms of kinship with the mysteries of animal being I had first tasted in my mother's barnyard, so to speak. My education and grasp of language had given me a vast framework of words and concepts, yet none of them could encompass what I longed for most or assuage the growing sense of betrayal I felt: that somehow there were two mother tongues—the syntactical language of speech and thought, on the one hand, and the quiet wisdoms of bodies, on the other. What was worse, they seemed to be in conflict—or, rather, the blustery arrogance of human logos was always bulldozing over the quieter wisdoms of embodied beings present in times and places.

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So my own black milk figured a breach: the body of language as a substance darkened with the loss of a primal embodied mother tongue; the "body's nocturnal memory," as Kristeva calls it in *Strangers to Ourselves*.[7] At the same time, in the act of pursuing this separation poetically, I glimpsed a promise of redemption: the shadow of what was lost reabsorbed into the substance, made present again. The black milk trope promised a new way in, somehow—one that could flow through the barriers between species, which in human terms are mainly made of words and names that are supposed to distinguish "us" from "them." I was cultured to assume, after all, that our taxonomies and syntaxes are the exceptional faculties that hold us humans high and clean above the mud in which the killable beasts are mired.[8] But the traces written into the barnyard mud are where I had always found the deepest mysteries of being: not a human mother tongue, in the strictest sense, but the promise of a broader intraspecies one.

So my black-milk longings reached out toward that other mother tongue and thus required a passage through the barbed-wire strands of logos that stand between us humans and the "lower animals." Paradoxically enough, this slipping through logos began with the discovery of one small but powerful three-letter word, and a dirty one, no less: the word was "ass." In the luckiest moments of creative practice, such explosive words or images may ignite, like fireworks or dynamite, to blow open an unforeseen passage across some previously intractable impasse. Artists have no choice but to trust such openings when they arise: Potent symbols and metaphors can sometimes be our only means of getting at something so massive and complex that it will not fit inside our viewfinders otherwise. A potent symbol can embolden us to explore intuitive territories that scare off the rational mind. Sometimes obsessions like these can even become flickering beacons, shining forth to carry cracked hopes through the black wind of terrible times.

So it was for me when I first encountered the American Spotted Ass. It happened in the spring of 2001. I stumbled, innocently enough, onto spottedass.com. Perhaps the power of the word in this case dwelt in the fact that "ass" was the one "dirty" word my mother discouraged me from saying as a child; she said it was "unladylike" and perhaps even "crass." Significantly, this was one of few linguistic prohibitions that came down from a mother who had her own mouth washed out with soap (literally) as a teenager for telling her little brother to "shut up." She frowned on "fuck" and "shit," yes, but for some reason "ass" was the only edgy word that I did not use liberally into adolescence and onward. But . . . when I saw the possibilities of "ass" as transformed suddenly by the multilayered appendages of "American"

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and "Spotted"—here representing a relatively rare, humble, and spectacular breed of domestic equine—this dirty word's forbidden nature bloomed with lovely ambiguities. Better yet, it skipped with the slip'n'slide felicity of the double-meaning pun that by its very nature undermines the stability of any tongue. Indeed, "ass" may well be the only "dirty" word in the American vernacular that also appears in Holy Scripture. In any case, "ass" had just the charge I needed to implode certain impasses, to blast through the seams between words and the physical world that pester every poet. The word "ass" became like a skeleton key, unlocking door after door into labyrinthine depths. I had no choice but to seize on this beacon, the American Spotted Ass, with all my might.

And so Aliass and I came to be zigzagging our way across three Southern states in that summer of 2002. Haunted as I was by the breach between naming and other ways of knowing, I delighted in the pun because it figured the vast gulf between knowing the name of a species and knowing another creature more deeply. What do you do, as an aspiring poet, when words become more of an obstacle to intimacy than a means of connection? Or, more accurately, what do you do when the very use of names and abstractions seems to imply an exclusive authority that undermines our companions' ways of knowing the world? I went into that first journey under the guise of a "writer," but what I really hoped was that our time on the road itself *was the book*. Over those weeks of traveling with Aliass, I became more and more certain that the truest, most beautiful book I could imagine must be written collaboratively, with the full participation and presence of Aliass and every other invisible and visible swarming entity we moved among. Aliass must be co-author in her own inscrutable way as much as I was in mine, along with the cedar trees of Tennessee and stray dogs and cicadas and brightly clad churchgoers milling in their parking lots on Wednesday evenings and roadside vines and turtles and thunderstorms and even that lone brown cow ruminating on a far hilltop overlooking Interstate 40, who watched with mild interest one evening as we passed. The author of such a journey, any journey, could not be one human woman alone but every swarming body that was part of it, every agent that operated visibly and invisibly in all those places in time.

Nevertheless, a person cannot go around calling herself a poet without something to show for it: a book that people can read or, at the very least, a single poem. So my poetically burdened ass remained stuck in a double bind, in a kind of artistic no-man's-land, with no choice, it seemed, but to suck it up and claim the sacred burden of human authorship, or . . . what?

In honor of open questions and Aliass's wordless ways, I have spent the

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past decade establishing this very "what?" at the heart of an artistic practice. Our adventures did not end with arrival in Virginia and Passenger's birth. Indeed, the first long-ass journey proved to be the initiation of an ongoing exploration—ways of bodily being writing themselves through passages in places and times. So it was in the summer of 2004, when a strange and peculiarly American vehicle known as the Dead-Car Wagon made a slow crossing, departing from the gates of a NASCAR speedway in rural Virginia and heading south, over the state line, to end its journey in the parking lot of an abandoned church in Eden, North Carolina.[9] As an incarnation, the Dead-Car Wagon's physical form was resurrected from the stripped carcass of an orange 1980 Ford Pinto, pulled by a team of asses (Aliass and Bronson) and piloted by two human drivers. Along the Southern back roads and county routes, this vehicle—heavy with a load of cultural history and other cargo—rattled on for three days: a rolling meditation on the American sense of place and passage, in light of car culture and suburban sprawl, Manifest Destiny and colonialism, and in remembrance of the kinds of wayside exchanges that are impossible when all places, along with the communities and ecologies they contain, are nothing but terminal blurs in the windshield glass.

The Dead-Car Wagon sparked rich conversations. Almost every person we met had a memory to share, from Kodachrome-tinted recollections of their own ill-fated Ford Pintos to Granny Lankford's rusty memories of riding bareback on her daddy's mule to local square dances. The Dead-Car Crossing reached into local environs in ways a poem on the page could never do, especially in a region where many people—many other beings, for that matter—do not read as a pastime. One afternoon as the wagon creaked past a row of dilapidated, seemingly abandoned mobile homes on a rural Virginia back road, an old lady came out of her trailer holding a quivering Chihuahua to her chest, and as we passed, she pointed at the strange equipage and talked softly to the little dog. Her words, though unheard by anybody but the Chihuahua, were the real substance of the poem we set out to "write" with the Dead-Car Wagon.

On the road, it is always a different story. Narrative unravels itself with its own momentum and with a cast of untold millions. Immersion in the journey is one thing, but in the aftermath, I was bedeviled again by the tension between incarnation borne in time and places and the seemingly opposite task of sitting down at the desk to conscript experiences into text, given only one's own limited perspective and vocabulary to draw from. Once again, I was frustrated by a desire to let the wordless interweavings of bodies in time somehow *be the text*.

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FIGURE 2.3 Bronson and Aliass taking a roadside rest from pulling the Dead-Car Wagon in the hammering heat of a July afternoon in 2004, stopping across the road from the trailer home of Bertha "Granny" Lankford and her son David Harris in Ridgeway, Virginia. Photograph by Jack Christian. See multispecies-salon.org/bolender.

Then, in the spring of 2005, I came across the French phenomenon of *savon au lait d'anesse* (assmilk soap). Aliass's milk for Passenger was gone by then, but nevertheless, when I held in my hand the paper-wrapped, flowery-scented soap a friend had sent me from France, all the figural possibilities of assmilk that I had pondered back on the road with Aliass and years afterward took a sudden and solid form. This soap offered a way to hold milk, a substance by nature as perishable as memory itself, and to transform its immunoglobulins and phospholipids into a cool magical little stone with properties of both cleansing and healing.[10] With *savon au lait d'anesse* I felt like somebody had handed me a formula for the Philosopher's Stone, or maybe the blueprint for a Rural Alchemy Workshop magnum opass.

Rural Alchemy Workshop Assmilk Soap may be the most potent material means I have found to reckon with the abyss between human ways of knowing and the full-bodied presences of other animals who inhabit the world with us. Like our bodies, every bar of Assmilk Soap holds its own unwritten story in the invisible traces of bodies and antibodies immersed and entan-

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FIGURE 2.4 R. A. W. Assmilk Soap on display in the Ironworks gallery in New Orleans. Photograph by Sean C. Hart. See multispecies-salon.org/bolender.

gled in specific times and places. Here at last I found a way to figure the wordless body's side of the story, writing itself in milk made of interactions in time and places. Given that every lactating femammal responds to her environment biochemically, all milk must hold a story of places her body has been and her various encounters with other species along the way—millions of interactions in every breath and bite and suck—from nourishing plant proteins to unfamiliar bacteria. Try letting your imagination dwell on that astronomical infinitude of mammalian experiences next time you stand in the dairy aisle of a supermarket. That said, milk need not be translated into words or chemical equations to work its ordinary magic. For R. A. W.'s aims, the potency of Assmilk is its capacity to open imaginative space for holistic wisdoms of the animal body, known and unknown, and to remind us that our bodies are always bound to the places and others we find ourselves among. With its double-barreled cleansing powers—combining the immunobiology of milk and the unique chemistry of soap—R. A. W. Assmilk Soap draws on both biological and metaphorical aspects of our multispecies mammalian enterprise, grounded in the living narrative I have inhabited with a special herd of asses over the past decade.

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From idea to incarnation, R. A. W. Assmilk Soap became the material medium of an ongoing collaboration involving *Equus asinus* and *Homo sapiens*, which invites human users to imagine and enact ways we might work to cleanse tough stains of fear, shame, and fouled tongues that plague our kinships with other creatures and ecosystems. In this sense, R. A. W. Assmilk Soap draws inspiration from contemporary ecological artworks that involve both material and semiotic acts of biological remediation, wherein artists frame systemic biological processes to address particular environmental woes. Mel Chin's *Revival Field* (1990–), for instance, uses several different plant species called hyperaccumulators to naturally leach toxins from poisoned soil in the Pig's Eye Landfill in Minnesota; Chin draws poetic resonance from cycles of plant growth and harvest as they cleanse the soil over time. Jackie Brookner's installation *Prima Lingua* (First Language/First Tongue; 1996) demonstrates a cycle whereby the biochemical filtering processes of mosses, plants, and volcanic rocks cleanse water polluted by agricultural runoff. As the dirty water runs over the rock—shaped provocatively like an extended human tongue—the plants and minerals absorb pollutants, over time cleansing the water and the surrounding air. *Prima Lingua* suggests in both function and title that the healing powers of such invisible, biological processes are an essential part of an original mother tongue that all earthly bodies speak. More so, this mother of all tongues is a porous matrix of bodies in process that always enfolds us, whether we are aware of it or not.

I initially envisioned R. A. W. Assmilk Soap as a kind of exhaustive scholarly investigation of specific places, akin to the massive *Landscape and Memory*, which Simon Schama describes as "an excavation [of landscapes] below our conventional sight-level to recover the veins of myth and memory that lie beneath the surface."[11] Yet the essence of R. A. W. Assmilk Soap holds that those humanly historical "veins of myth and memory" buried in our landscapes are inextricably entwined with the fleeting, unwritten, embodied blood vessels and mammary glands of many species and with the mandibles and rootlets and beating blood of all who inhabit places. Playing on Schama, I called the earliest incarnation of the Assmilk Soap project "Landscape and Mammary," building on the idea of an embodied woman–she-ass partnership within specific places. I, humanly, could dig into a place through observation, direct experience, and research into threads of natural-cultural history, while the lactating she-ass's role was to percolate the cleansing milk-of-place to go into the soap. The hope was that excavating the "lyes" of the land in this sense and then mixing them with the beneficent properties of locally

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brewed assmilk might work with imagination to neutralize some of a place's buried ailments.

But just what kinds of stains are we talking about here? What kinds of shames and fears? And how, specifically, do I propose R. A. W. Assmilk Soap could work to cleanse them, or even act as a conduit for hopeful gestures in landscapes blasted by past horrors and present complex global economic and political forces?

Take, for instance, the American South, where in many places a history of racial exploitation is barely buried in the sandy red soil; the dirt roads, white-columned front porches of antebellum mansions, and crooked backyard slave shacks still evoke memories of the Southern plantation economy founded on slave labor, reliant on the suffering of humans and mules and the plundering of forests and soils and whatever entities could be made to serve its rapacious hungers. More than this well-known history, though, the postindustrial South these days is scarred by other, infinitely more voracious consumer economies, evidenced by acres and acres of asphalt, Walmart parking lots and endless gas stations, empty gravel lots, and half-abandoned strip malls. I remember with a shudder one day in 2002 when Aliass and I got lost on the Alcoa Highway on the outskirts of Knoxville, Tennessee. I was hauling Aliass in the trailer behind my Chevy Caprice, looking for a place to leave the rig and set out on foot and hoof again, but what I saw on the Alcoa Highway made me lose my nerve entirely. The landscape was nothing but acres of blinding car dealerships and heavy-machinery lots for as far as the eye could see in any direction—an impermeable desert far more forbidding than Death Valley could ever be.

If the vision of an endless Alcoa Highway is not enough to unsettle our lingering pastoral idylls, one can always turn to gut-wrenching images of ravaged Appalachian mountain ranges, clear-cut old-growth forests, Gulf Coast beaches strewn with tar balls and dead seabirds, or drowned neighborhoods in the paths of broken levees. That said, the territory of Assmilk Soap is not just the visible scars of industrial wastelands but more so the hidden pollutions—poisons born of exploited bodies, beings, minerals, and ecosystems—and the ways they linger in our bodies, thoughts, and utterances. The inner realm is where R. A. W. Assmilk Soap really finds its potency, calling on imagination to bring our buried stains to the surface—at least to attend to them, if not to assuage them. The actual milk soap-making act depends on a transformative chemical process known as saponification, which significantly changes both assmilk and another essential soap ingredient, lye (sodium hydroxide). Lye alone will burn the skin fiercely, but when mixed

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with milk and base oils and stirred until it "traces," lye neutralizes to become the solvent agent in soap and thus the ultimate cleansing substance.[12]

The transformation embodied in saponification echoes back to the black milk as it functions in Celan's poetics. In his "black milk," Celan (whose name I often accidentally mistype as "Clean") seeks to "find words for 'that which happened,' as he called the Holocaust, or *Shoah*. . . . [H]ow to speak of and through the 'thousand darknesses of deathbringing speech.'" Transformative power abides in the poetic act, as Felstiner observes: "The cadence and imagery of this ballad ["Deathfugue"] . . . engage atrocity with art, as Celan would go on doing during the next quarter century."[13]

Drawing on its own distinct sources of black milk and poetic hope, R. A. W. Assmilk Soap seeks first to acknowledge how human logos too often excludes interspecies wisdoms in the act of dividing "human" and "animal"—a separation that justifies the ways in which we exploit and desecrate so many forms of life. We all live in landscapes and languages that hold traces of lost kinships and human and ecological atrocities. I thought of this often as I wandered through the South with Aliass. I liked to imagine that somehow the elements of weeds she ate on that byway in Tennessee that parallels the Trail of Tears, or the stream water she drank in the historically toxic town of Oak Ridge, were being transformed as they passed through her muzzle, tongue, stomach, blood, and glands to become something more wholesome—foremost, of course, the colostrum that nourished Passenger. At the same time, though, as the milk holds traces of unspoken intimacies and elements we gather on our journeys through times and places, Assmilk Soap becomes a figural substance that might also nourish human imaginative action, holding forth a cleansing hope in the form of a rarefied solvent for our environments and psyches. And finally, as it melts away with use and time, R. A. W. Assmilk Soap emulates the fleeting and infinite body-to-body intimacies that inscribe the unwritten and richly entangled autobiographies of every animal being.

These ordinary-looking bars of soap foam up in the usual way when they mix with water, but the real power resides in collective meaning-making gestures. In recent years, R. A. W. Assmilk Soap has engaged a collaborative approach, inviting individuals to encounter the beneficent properties of assmilk in cleansing suds and to lather through layers of whatever forms of pollution (chemical, psychological, linguistic) threaten the places and others we love. Along with R. A. W. Assmilk, each bar of soap contains other "ingredients" submitted by a collaborator. These ingredients relate to a place, way of life, memory, conundrum, or relationship that the soap's imaginer wants to wash in some way. Ingredients of R. A. W. Assmilk Soaps have ranged from

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gatherings of native and non-native plant species of a specific bioregion to personally or culturally loaded objects or substances, such as the artist Bill Kelly's mix of rain, motor oil, and blood and the poet Claire Hero's teeth of a road-killed coyote. Each soap label reads like a dark little love poem to the complexities of our multispecies habitations. Each bar of soap is an experiment, an ongoing interrogation.

One of the first batches of R. A. W. Assmilk Soap included milk from both she-ass and human sources. Sixteen people—in this case, mostly educated, middle-class artists, mothers, musicians, and psychotherapists from different places in the United States—contributed ingredients for their own, individual R. A. W. place soaps. This batch was part of an interdisciplinary collaboration with the artist Emily Stone called *Domestic/Wild*, which culminated in an experimental performance that she produced in Portland, Oregon, in January 2010. Under Stone's direction, *Domestic/Wild* explored embodied tensions between the bounds of domesticity—especially as they are experienced by homebound mothers of small children—and the body's inherent animal wildness and wisdoms. In the role of "Lecturer" within the *Domestic/Wild* show, R. A. W. talk of interspecies nursing and rarefied forms of she-ass husbandry brought interesting twists to the questions of mammalian wildness and domesticity, as the show explored these themes and questions through dance, spoken words, video, live music, and still images.

In keeping with *Domestic/Wild*'s aims to delve into unexplored places that we find inside our own bodies and homes, Stone's breast milk provided a vital human ingredient in that particular R. A. W. soap batch. The label she wrote for her specially made bar of soap tells a story of imaginative exploration into such territories:

> Ingredients: 100% RAW milk (she-ass and human),
> organic base oils; question; dust from
> under couch (terra incognita); grass, leaves, and sticks
> picked up by Athena at night; a green note from my Dad;
> small portions of a nest that had two dead baby birds in it;
> a burnt match and a small bit of firewood.

Questions of home and homemaking: Who lives here? What are we most afraid of? What happens if we leave a door wide open between inside and outside? How can we make any given place safe and clean for loved ones and fellow creatures? (A place can be bounded however one wants, of course: a city, a state, an estuary, a childhood, a kitchen, a room that exists only in the mind) How can we move beyond the paralyses of fear and shame, knowing

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our species floods the land continuously with invisible toxins, poisoning soil and watersheds and the many biologies and ecologies that depend on them? How can we reckon with all that is being lost at our hands?

Rural Alchemy Workshop Assmilk Soap must be a powerful solvent, indeed, to equal the fearsome pollutions of hopes and homelands it goes up against. I can testify to this much: every time I pour the measured ounces of lye into assmilk in making the soap, the mixture sizzles and steams and glows bright and hot as a barn fire. The first two times I poured lye into Passenger's milk, the reaction was so strong it cracked the jar. That last batch, the mixture got so hot it turned black.

I suppose it is no coincidence that R. A. W. Assmilk Soap took physical form in Carnesville, Georgia—a place that goes a long way toward evincing how "the dirty South" got its name. Every time it rained on our little ass farm, shards of glass and scraps of burned plastic, broken mirrors, and bent scraps of rusty metal surfaced from the soil in the paddock. This trash had been left behind by the land's previous inhabitants, buried in the heart of our barnyard where the herd lived on bare hooves. I kept a little collection of these artifacts in the feed room until it got too overwhelming—trashy treasures including old cassette tapes and pink plastic My Little Pony change purses, crushed metal light bulb ends, whole antique bottles, and ancient pull-tab beer cans—but mostly the collection was just sharp and dangerous pieces of old burned and broken things. These dangers in the barnyard haunted me with a deeper need to know: How deep down does the human pollution go? What about on the other side of the hill, where the powers-that-be bulldozed the forest for the coming industrial park? If I dug down deep enough, could I ever find soil that is fertile, dark, and clean?

So I went out one January day with my bar of Assmilk Soap, made especially for Carnesville with bits of plastic trash and broken mirror and fur and creek mud and leaves and acorns from the massive old water oak by the barn, and I scrubbed for hours with everything I had. I washed the mud, the fouled creek, the sad depleted soil. I scrubbed the dead pine trees in the asses' paddock where the power line crew had sprayed herbicide one day when we were not home. I spent that whole winter afternoon with my bare feet sunk in the cold mud and manure of the barnyard, washing Carnesville with the faint hope that it is possible to maintain a plot anywhere on this wracked Earth that is safe for all our bodies to thrive. This hope was not easy to conjure; along with a general sense of ominous presences in the local landscapes, there was the woe that welled up in me every week when our next-door neighbor, Mr. Crump, burned his plastic household trash, and

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the noxious black smoke wafted through the scraggly pine trees and into the lungs of the herd, along with the lungs of the dogs, humans, birds, and every other breathing being, even coating the leaves of the trees and garden greens. Traces of it likely ended up in Passenger's milk. And let us not forget the chicken shit: Carnesville is the seat of a Georgia county that boasts the most industrial chicken houses of any in the United States, and every winter the farmer who leased the hayfields just up the road would spread the reeking manure of millions of bald and miserable birds onto the fields as fertilizer so that the next rain would roll it downhill and into our soil, creek, and drinking water. Carnesville is stained in other ways, so many ways, and it is our fault; all of us are implicated. As we well know, Carnesville is not the only place so stained in the Anthropocene.

But in spite of all this toxic fear and shame—or maybe because of it—R. A. W. Assmilk Soap holds forth that heartening forms of interspecies eros and wonder can still be found in places alive with worldly webs of creaturely beings. For three years, hardscrabble Carnesville offered a quiet place on a forested dirt road in which to operate the Rural Alchemy Workshop's small-scale, secret ass dairy operation. Passenger and Henry's foal, Nicholass, was born in the summer of 2010. Aliass stood by in the dark like a sentinel while Passenger labored, pacing back and forth until the time came when she lay down in the paddock dirt and birthed the little wet wisp, who was born black as a shadow under the full moon.

For a year after Little Nick was born, R. A. W. was in full swing; Passenger made milk for him, and I made Assmilk Soap.[14] There beside the twinkling waters of the foamy brown creek, I stirred this mixture of lye and Pass-milk, and dark as it was with local, historical, and global-industrial-capitalist-petrochemical realities, it was just as densely sweet with abiding desires, kinships, and rememberings. A certain joyful post-domestic eros flows in the midst of a big ass multispecies family, in the dusty domestic ungulate mesh of tail-swishing, ear-flicking, braying, grazing, long-eared listening, and the rarefied wonder of coming to know oneself and others more deeply in daily acts of R. A. W. ass husbandry.

As much as I invest artistically in the power of Assmilk Soap, the scope of this R. A. W. enterprise remains small. Aside from the fact that R. A. W. Assmilk Soap is intimately bound to the fortunes of one small ass herd, the scale of any ethically sound ass dairy is limited by harsh economic and sociocultural realities that affect the lives of American asses in general. Way too many abused and neglected domestic donkeys live in the United States, with way too few humans who have the will and means to properly care for

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FIGURE 2.5 Passenger nursing Nicholass Moon about an hour after his birth on a steamy Georgia night in July 2010. Aliass stood in the near distance through the whole labor, birth, and early hours, quietly alert to the goings on and protecting the space and time of newborn mammalian bonding. Photograph by Karin Bolender. See multispecies-salon.org/bolender.

them.[15] But this is not the only reason I do not make a business of selling R. A. W. Assmilk Soap. While we know too well that almost anything can be traded in the global market these days, from preteen girls to cloned embryos, Assmilk Soap is not an easy product to move. It is not pretty, and it is not scented with alluring perfumes; R. A. W. Assmilk Soap is only as solvent as the imagination that a washer is willing to wet it with, and it is not for the squeamish. Each soap is embedded with physical objects of significance (gnarly tufts of ass fur, for instance, or shards of veal-calf bones), along with other special ingredients and whatever affective layers of meaning, longing, memories, and taboos a user imbues it with.

But for all of its others possible uses, in the end R. A. W. Assmilk Soap is a solvent made especially for language, to wash down past the accumulated stains of this and that named distinction to the common roots of beings in places. It is about trying to be at home in earthly ecologies, and as such, it aims to rinse away the dualism that splits the language-laden tongue from

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the quieter, embodied wisdom of the other ones, the ones that thrive in flesh and fur and mud, beyond all the names and distinctions. In essence, I make Assmilk Soap because I am a member of a unique and uniquely burdened species, trying to find her place in the world with respect to other creatures while navigating a minefield of human shame, divisive definitions, and earthly desecrations. We all have to recognize the sources that sustain us to survive, and by those recognitions and connections, we come to understand what and who we are, where and how we belong.

And this brings me back one last time to the idea of black milk and to the particular forms of hope and longing embedded in Assmilk Soap. Despite all of the buried trash and broken mirrors in the Carnesville barnyard, years of R. A. W. exploration in the woods and grass and paddock mud finally revealed the true source of my shadowy assmilk hungers. One morning when Little Nick was just a few days old, I was out in the paddock with him and Pass and I saw him do something funny: He was bent down awkwardly between his still wobbly, widespread front legs, trying to nurse on a small clump of grass. His little black muzzle worked at the green wisps with the full force of his nursling hunger, puckering around the stems in an earnest, if experimental, effort to suck sustenance from them. He gave up after a minute, as his efforts failed to yield sweet assmilk from the grassroots and dirt. But he was onto something: His moment of conflation foreshadowed a big leap he would take soon enough from milk to roughage; he was already beginning to learn to pluck and chew and so laying claim to the herbivorous being he was born into.

At the time, I was amused by his conflation of the motherbody and the world of things in the surrounding environment. For the newborn ass, this was just a transitional moment, but as I reflected on the scene later on, I realized that my own confusion on this matter—of where and how in the world we find our true sustenance and ways of belonging—has been lifelong. Like Little Nick, I have been seeking nourishment among the roadside weeds and dirt and asphalt of landscapes, places where I found myself tangled with others in time. I have tried in vain to suck a black-milk brew of lost times, places, and even ways of knowing from the land itself, from lichen-crusted rocks and barks and tall grass, from birdcalls and cattails and thorny brambles and mud puddles. In the circuits of all those long-ass journeys, I never could find that one sweet spot that would yield it, but I always felt the milk of the land was present out there, flowing just under the surfaces, invisible and potent, through infinite webs of tissues and minerals and leaves and watersheds.

In my experience as a postindustrial American human person, the search

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FIGURE 2.6 Aliass and a pine tree. Photograph by Karin Bolender. See multispecies-salon.org/bolender.

for nourishment in wracked landscapes is as much a psychological or spiritual hunger as a biological one. Each in our own special ways, Little Nick and I felt around our shared environment, looking for what we needed most to help us survive and to know who we are and where we belong. For a time at least, we both found what we needed in the bright eyes, dusty fur, and sweet assmilk of a familiar, ornery herd of American Spotted Asses. For him, Passenger's milk held essential antibodies and proteins he needed to develop and grow. For me, R. A. W. Assmilk remains a substance full of unspoken traces, shadowy hopes, and wholesome promises of full and deeply lived immersion in the meshes of otherness where we find ourselves.

NOTES

1. The American Spotted Ass is a variant breed of the common domestic donkey, bred specifically for piebald ("spotted") coat color. While the genes for multicolored coats exist in donkeys worldwide, the history of this breed in the United States, as narrated by the American Council of Spotted Asses, is described on the organization's official website accessed January 14, 2013, http://www.spottedass.com.

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2. Celan, *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, 30.

3. Felstiner, "Preface," xxii.

4. I discovered an interesting insight in an essay on Bachmann's fiction by Gisela Brinker-Gabler, who writes, "Rejecting contact with the mother tongue cuts off the past and might be a life-saving strategy, if there is some profoundly detested experience." As a contemporary of Celan's, Bachmann shared his struggle to cleanse language in light of the ways it was twisted and stained by the Third Reich. That idea resonated with me, although I did not know then what "detestable experience" might be the source of my own skepticism toward language. Later I came upon Kristeva's discussion of the mother tongue in *Strangers to Ourselves*, in which she describes "not speaking one's mother tongue. Living with resonances and reasoning that are cut off from the body's nocturnal memory, from the bittersweet slumber of childhood. To cut off one's mother tongue cuts off one's childhood and whatever past there was in that language." The relation of bodies and language is thus by no means a simple proposition. There might even be more than one mother tongue to reckon with: Brinker-Gabler, "Living and Lost in Language," 83; Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, 193.

5. I cannot resist echoing Nabokov's narrator Humbert here, "I am convinced, however, that in a certain magic and fateful way Lolita began with Annabel": Nabokov, *Lolita*, 14. Since there is no law on the books forbidding it, my love for Aliass may not demand quite the same degree of wistful eloquence that Humbert calls on to justify his illicit passion for the nymphet Dolores Haze. Nevertheless, I think Nabokov might appreciate the gesture of homage, given the ways in which adult passions are sometimes kindled by vital encounters submerged in the murky depths of childhood.

6. Horses maintain a distinct place of honor in the American imaginary—whether or not this translates into actual care for the real lives of individual equines. The thoroughbred racing industry is one major contributor to both the longstanding public passion for horse heroes and the darker side of myths and markets that revolve around them. The thousands of long-legged equine athletes who fail to become Seabiscuit or Smarty Jones end up trundling off to the "glue factory" in the long run. These horses are the ill-fated by-products of the storied Kentucky bluegrass industry. The anthropologist Rebecca Cassidy offers an insider's view of the complex history and inner workings of the thoroughbred industry in both Kentucky and Great Britain. Cassidy illustrates rich worlds orbiting around the towering icon of the perfect thoroughbred champion: proud and noble blood, speed incarnate: see Cassidy, *Horse People*. Asses, by contrast, do not enjoy such honors in the broader American culture, with the exceptions of certain circles that laud illustrious mammoth jacks used to sire mules and the ever growing and adored population of pet miniature donkeys. Both mammoth donkeys (more than fifty-four inches tall) and miniatures (less than thirty-six inches) are hot rural commodities, rarely selling for less than $500, whereas I have seen ads on Craigslist offering to throw in an average-size (thirty-six to fifty-four inches) standard donkey jack for free if you buy the seller's chicken coop for $60. In the world of American asses, size definitely matters. Indeed, it can be a matter of life and death.

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7. Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, 193.

8. Eben Kirksey and Stefan Helmreich draw on Agamben's *Homo Sacer* to illuminate a vital distinction in the introduction to their essay "The Emergence of Multispecies Ethnography." They write, "Animals, plants, fungi, and microbes once confined in anthropological accounts to the realm of *zoe* or 'bare life'—that which is killable—have started to appear alongside humans in the realm of *bios*, with legibly biographical and political lives": Kirksey and Helmreich, "The Emergence of Multispecies Ethnography," 545. This is the essence of a harrowing truth for me: Aliass and Passenger are killable in the society we live in. If something happened to our family, they would become mere assets without much economic value, and it is likely that they would wind up on a rumbling trailer to the slaughterhouse. More likely (because donkey meat is not much desired in the United States), they would go to a glue factory. Growing up, I was always aware of the distant hovering threat of the Glue Factory, the doom of equines who, for whatever reason, fail to find or no longer fit useful roles in human society. I always pictured the glue factory vaguely, something like a remote, snow-covered mountain in Mongolia. I was not aware as a kid that the proverbial "glue factory" is a very real place, otherwise known as the local rendering plant. I did not know that I was consuming the products of this industrial process daily and in hundreds of ways other than Elmer's. Equines were not the only creatures I considered family who ended up, literally, in the mix. Thousands of unwanted dogs and cats also end up at the rendering plant and so are annihilated and dispersed into products as diverse as makeup and soap and, most horrifically, cheap dog food. Back in my childhood, the glue factory was only a distant threat, like mortality itself. It was not until I came into new awareness as I grew up that I began to realize and struggle with the conundrum this presents: However fuzzy the boundary between other species and me may be in my experience and ontology, a stark line is drawn in Western society that renders some of my loved ones killable while others enjoy a full suite of civil and individual rights. Most deeply, I know this to be wrong, wrong, wrong. I know that dog and donkey and horse and cat and every other creature has a unique *bios*, however unwritable or unknowable it may be for human logos. Thus, like so many of us, I find myself in a society with which I am fundamentally at odds.

9. The Dead-Car Wagon rolled out in collaboration with the poet Jack Christian, with the draft power of Aliass and Bronson, and with help from the renegade engineer Fred Taylor, the ass-angel Cheryl Haas, the Christian family, and a grant from the Gunk Foundation, which supports public art in nontraditional venues.

10. With "magic stone," I echo the French poet Francis Ponge, who wrote an entire treatise (simply titled *Soap*) on the nature of this slippery proposition. He explored the notion that his "processual poetry" on the essence of soap could itself act to cleanse habitual and crusty ways of reading, writing, using language to interface with the world. "So we slip from words to meanings . . . by a glistening inebriety, or rather an effervescence, a cold ebullience which, besides, we come out of, and here is the great lesson—with cleaner, purer hands than before this exercise began": Ponge, *Soap*, 19.

11. Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, 14.

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12. As one stirs the mixture of milk, lye, and oils for anywhere between twenty minutes and two hours, it gradually thickens. When a line of the thickened liquid dripped onto the surface remains there without sinking (a phenomenon called "tracing") it means saponification has begun and the mixture is ready to be poured into molds to fully saponify and harden.

13. Felstiner, "Preface," xxii.

14. Following the best practices of French assmilk farmers and the advice of my veterinarian, Dr. Alice Beretta, I did not milk Passenger for the first five months of Nick's nursing life. Once he was old enough to eat hay and grain, I began the milking process. A few times a week, I would let Passenger out of the paddock to graze in the yard. Nick would invariably stand in the corner of the paddock and stamp his front hooves; he had not learned to bray yet. After a separation of an hour or so, I could milk Passenger—yielding a cup or so on a good day—then put them back together. If I had been more diligent, I could have separated them longer and more often and thus obtained a lot more milk. I learned a thing or two about milking asses from Jean-François Wambeke, the proprietor of the beautiful Asinerie d'Embazac assmilk dairy farm in L'Isle Jourdain, near Toulouse in the south of France. Among other important facts, he told me that lactating she-asses (commonly known as jennies in English and as *les anesses* in French) must be able to see their foals to produce milk. Asinerie d'Embazac maintains two enclosures—one for the anesses and one for the foals—separated by a flowery footpath and a distance of maybe twenty feet. The anesses enter the milking paddock in the morning. Throughout the day Wambeke milks them several times and obtains one to two liters from each. Needless to say, the market for assmilk in Europe is different from that in the United States. Asinerie d'Embazac maintains a website that offers insight into the daily operations of an assmilk dairy: accessed January 14, 2013, http://www.embazac.com.

15. From the ramshackle livestock-sale barn in Paris, Tennessee, my ass mentor Mariann Black reports that haggard and neglected standard donkeys are selling for $20–$30 a head. Even in the South—which often celebrates and mythologizes the mule (i.e., the sterile offspring of a donkey sire and a horse dam) as a partner in Southern heritage and Reconstruction—domestic donkeys are still oft-misunderstood creatures whose status as equine companion species varies wildly, along with their standards of care. According to Jean-François Wambeke of Asinerie d'Embazac, economic and ethical considerations of dairy-ass farmers vary within Europe, especially in France and Belgium. I gathered that donkeys are more populous in France because Europeans eat equine meat. Humane slaughter is a viable option for donkeys who do not find places as companion animals. As of this writing, the question of whether to reopen equine slaughterhouses on US soil is hotly debated.

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